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THE PROPOSED CREEDAL BASIS OF CHRISTIAN REUNION

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From the course taken in recent controversy in regard to Christian reunion, one would anticipate that the discussion will probably center for the present around the interesting questions of valid ordination, ministry, and sacraments. It is the purpose of this paper, however, to draw attention to a no less interesting and fundamental issue involved in the problem, viz.: the proposed doctrinal basis on which it is suggested that different groups of Christians should unite.

No one who has the welfare of the Church of Christ at heart could do other than welcome warmly and gratefully the two great Anglican statements of 1920, viz.: Dr. A. C. Headlam's Bampton Lectures, *The Doctrine of the Church and Christian Reunion*, and the *Appeal to All Christian People* issued by the bishops assembled at Lambeth. It is perhaps too much to hope that every response made to these statements will exhibit that broad, sane, and constructive outlook which alone is worthy of so great and solemn an occasion; but there is every reason to be confident that the genuinely Christian spirit in which the new beginning has been made will evoke an equally wise and generous attitude in those to whom it is addressed. In the nature of the case, however, the right response must in the first place take the form of a full and candid discussion of the points that have been raised; and, if such discussion should involve a certain amount of apparently negative criticism, that need not denote any lack of cordial and brotherly regard for those who have raised these points, or any lukewarmness or despair in regard to the cause of

Christian unity. If one may borrow a proverb once used by Clement of Alexandria, ὅς δ' ἐλέγχει μετὰ παρρησίας εἰρηνοποιεῖ.

Both the Lambeth Appeal and the Bampton Lectures propose the adoption of the Scriptures and the so-called "Nicene Creed" as the doctrinal basis of reunion. Little difficulty need be anticipated in regard to the Scriptures, since room for the critical treatment of them is admitted on all hands to be necessary. Let us rather turn to the proposal in regard to the Creed. The bishops say, "We believe that the visible unity of the Church will be found to involve the whole-hearted acceptance of the Holy Scriptures . . . and the Creed commonly called Nicene, as the sufficient statement of the Christian faith, and either it or the Apostles' Creed as the *Baptismal confession of belief* . . ." (italics mine). Dr. Headlam makes no proposal in regard to the Apostles' Creed and does not in so many words suggest the Nicene Creed as the *baptismal* confession; but it is evident that he does not feel able to find a place in the reunited church for those who cannot personally accept it. He says:

I would put to you that the only Christian reunion that is possible is the reunion of that Christianity which is commonly designated as orthodox—a reunion on the basis of belief in the Incarnation and the Trinity. However much we may respect the personal character or the intellectual attainments of the Unitarian, it would be difficult to find a place for him in the reconstructed Church. To the Modernist I would say that he must settle with his own conscience whether he can accept the Creed of the Church. We cannot write a new creed for him, nor reconstruct Christianity to suit his taste. It is in the traditional beliefs now as always that the whole Church—Protestant and Catholic alike—finds its inspiration, and these beliefs are put forward in the Creed in the manner which may most generally obtain acceptance.¹

It is obvious, therefore, from both statements that the doctrinal basis of reunion is intended to serve as a ground of exclusion from the church of those who cannot conscientiously accept the Creed as their personal belief. It is this fact that

¹ *Doctrine of the Church*, p. 238; cf. pp. 233, 235.

makes the question so extremely serious. If we were in search simply of a formula to stand as the general manifesto of the church, it might not be necessary to insist that the words adopted should exactly express the personal beliefs of every member who has a right to be represented; but if we are in search of a formula that is to serve as a test of membership—a formula, that is, the non-acceptance of which is to be a sufficient ground for refusing church-membership to one who may passionately desire it, and who professes faith in Christ—that is a very different matter. It will not in that case suffice that our proposed doctrinal basis is truly venerable, that the majority of post-Reformation churches accept it, that it was established by an oecumenical council, or even that it was once the belief of the whole undivided church. Nothing less than absolute and demonstrable infallibility will do. For if this be lacking, the margin of uncertainty—whatever and however small it be—may prove the very flaw which causes the exclusion of a genuine Christian from the fold of Christ's church. We are told that, in the time of the Commonwealth, "Baxter and Dr. Owen were together members of a committee appointed by the Parliament . . . to draw up a list of fundamentals. The list was intended to define the meaning of the words occurring in the instrument of government, 'faith in God by Jesus Christ,' it being laid down in that document that all who professed such faith should have liberty, or free exercise of their religion. The divines appointed . . . very soon found, in Baxter's quaint language, 'how ticklish a business the enumeration of fundamentals was.'"¹ And no wonder. Those who undertake to legislate as to who are to be allowed in the church and who are not, may well feel, like the members of a jury in a trial for murder, that nothing less than certainty can justify an unfavorable verdict. In face of the gravity of the issue, it is hard to feel that all the difficulties are met by the plea that we cannot do without

¹ Bruce, *Apologetics*, p. 300; cf. Channing, *Works* (1843 ed.), Vol. II, p. 355.

some creedal test, and that this or that creed is on the whole the most suitable.

Dr. Headlam bases the claims of the so-called Nicene Creed not so much on its origin and history prior to its oecumenical enactment in 451 A.D. as on two other considerations: the wide acceptance of the creed, and its inherent merits.

I. He points out that it was accepted by the whole church—East and West, pre-Reformation and (for the most part) post-Reformation. “This Creed has that acceptance in a way that, apart from the Scriptures, no other document in the Christian world has”: and—what is of special importance—it “has the merit of taking us behind all our divisions.”¹

In regard to this acceptance by the whole undivided church, three questions need to be asked:

1. What was the moral character of the church that accepted it? Let us pass by the unsatisfactory character of the Council of Chalcedon itself, as to which Dr. Headlam rightly pleads that we must judge charitably. Let us rather turn to the point on which he lays the real stress. “The Creed which was adopted at Chalcedon was accepted by the Church, and whatever criticism we may have to make against the Council will not take away from the authority of the Creed.”² But will not criticism justly leveled at the accepting church take away something from the authority of the Creed? Can the decision of a church that had so far forgotten its task, lost its purity, and missed its way, as had the church of the fifth century, be appealed to as of necessarily decisive authority for any subsequent age? For that was the century that saw the banishment of Chrysostom, the scraping of Hypatia, the persecution of the Donatists, the villainies of the “Robber Synod” of Ephesus, and the baptism of the bloody ruffian Clovis. It is not a question of judging the church of that time charitably or otherwise. It may be true that the fifth

¹ *Doctrine*, etc., p. 232; cf. p. 231.

² *Ibid.*, p. 237.

century was no worse, perhaps not so bad, as the twentieth is; but then we are not looking to the twentieth for an infallible formula. The question is whether or not we can rightly press on the allegiance of every Christian today the decisions of such a church as that of the fifth century.

2. What was the character of the "acceptance," on which so much is made to depend? Was it the free, untrammelled concurrence of Christians deliberating under no pressure but that of the transparent persuasiveness of the truth and the winning cogency of orthodox arguments? Not at all. The "acceptance" was the outcome of a long period of furious party-strife, in which the emperor and his court and the coercive machinery of the state were implicated from first to last. The long disputes that began in 318 A.D. were subject at every turn to imperial influence; and, under the successive edicts of Theodosius, Marcianus, Zeno, and Justinianus, heterodoxy was visited with state punishment. This is no mere matter of opinion; it is a matter of accredited history. What value attaches to a decision of the church arrived at and "accepted" under such conditions as these? Can the acceptance even be called unanimous in any real sense?¹

3. But in any case, what exactly is the ground for assigning supreme authority to this particular unanimous decision of the church? Are all unanimous beliefs of the church to be regarded as infallible, or only some? If all, what has become today of the unanimous belief of the primitive church in the early and visible return of Christ?² But if all are not infallible—and here is at least one exception—reason must be shown for accepting some unanimous beliefs and dropping others. What is it that makes the difference? Is it maturity? Then at what point, I ask, in the church's development, do her unanimous decisions cease to be fallible, and become infallible? Is it the importance of the subject? Then who is to say what are the vital and what the minor questions?

¹ See Martineau, *Seat of Authority in Religion*, pp. 152, 163 f. ² *Ibid.*, p. 565.

Is it the fact of the matter having been decided by councils prior to acceptance by the church? If so, then Athanasius, when he stood as the one dissenter "contra mundum," ought to have bowed to the authority of the church and become an Arian! Or is it the fact that the council is "general"? Then why not press today for the Chalcedonian symbol in its entirety¹—for was not that eventually accepted by the whole church? And is the "general" character of a council so easy to procure in reality, and so easily distinguishable when procured, that we may stake everything on the truth of its decisions, while treating as optional the findings of many a solemn synod which could not claim the title of "general"? Let me once again, in the words of another Bampton Lecturer of many years ago, press the plea that

it is only [by] an *assumption* . . . that universality and ubiquity are thus made the tests of religious doctrine. No universality or ubiquity can make that divine, which never was such. It is a mere prejudice of veneration for antiquity, and the imposing aspect of an unanimous acquiescence (if unanimous it really be), which make us regard that as truth, which comes so recommended to us. Truth is rather the attribute of the few than of the many. . . . Who then shall pronounce anything to be divine truth, *simply because* it has the marks of having been generally or universally received among men?²

A minister told me recently that he was in the habit of asking candidates for church-membership whether they wished to believe what the whole church believes. Candidates who remember that there have been times when the whole church believed something to be essential which we have since learned to be nonessential or perhaps untrue, would have no option but to reply to such a question, "No: not necessarily. In claiming church membership, I would rather profess simply my faith in Christ and my desire to believe *the truth*."

II. The claims of the Nicene Creed are made to rest also upon its inherent merit. The Lambeth Conference commends it as "the sufficient statement of the Christian faith." Dr.

¹ For which Dr. Headlam deliberately refrains from pressing (*Doctrine*, etc., p. 233).

² R. D. Hampden, *The Scholastic Philosophy Considered in Its Relation to Christian Theology* (1833), p. 356.

Headlam urges its dignity, its retention of what is necessary, its omission of what is unessential, etc. "The central faith of the Church has been from the beginning the belief in Christ. Here we have that belief expressed in its completeness and its fulness without mutilation but without addition."¹

1. If the Nicene Creed did really express belief in Christ "without addition," our discussion would be needless. But inasmuch as the Creed, in endeavoring to express belief in Christ "in its completeness," has made many and weighty additions to that simple profession, some estimate of the value of those additions is inevitable. And it is surely not hypercritical to urge that any verdict regarding them is bound to be to a certain extent relative to the personal attitude of the one who pronounces it. Many people find the clauses of the Creed perfectly acceptable, and, of course, they are entirely within their rights in doing so and in commending their view as the right one. But there are many others who claim the Christian name and desire the fellowship of the Church—yes, and who give evidence of the Spirit's activity in their lives—who yet find certain clauses in the Creed a great hindrance, and who cannot declare their acceptance of them without awkward mental reservations. By what authority is the standard of value of the one party to be made the standard of value for the other—on pain of exclusion of the latter from the church unless they comply? It is clearly a case for the utterance of Galba's challenge, "Commilito, quis iussit?"²

2. How can we regard as a "sufficient statement of the Christian faith" a formula which says nothing about the love of God or the goodness of our Lord's earthly life? These are fairly central articles of Christian belief, and ought surely

¹ *Doctrine*, etc., p. 233.

² Similarly, in regard to the *interpretation* of the Creed, Dr. Headlam says, "All that the Church may demand is that the interpretation should be in the opinion of a just judge one that may reasonably be held" (*Doctrine*, etc., p. 238). Could any statement reveal more patently the real arbitrariness of the standard proposed? Where can such a judge be found?

therefore to be explicitly mentioned in a statement that purports to be a summary of essentials. One can imagine the ready response, "These things are clearly *implied* in the Creed." But the whole Creed is also said to be *implied* in any real profession of faith in Christ; and, if so, why should the verbal expression of some implicates of faith be deemed indispensable, while the verbal expression of others equally vital is not considered necessary? Christian truth and Christian duty are co-ordinates; why should the church's baptismal formula bind the candidate to a certain minimum of Christian truth, while silent as to his commitments in the matter of conduct?¹ One cannot help seeing in the preference here given to orthodox belief an instance of a grave and age-long aberration of the church. The story of the creed-making centuries is the story of an increasing concern for doctrine and a decreasing concern for brotherly love; and the distorted vision therein revealed has often shipwrecked the great enterprises of Christianity. Yet it is this very one-sidedness that the Creed enshrines.

3. The Creed asserts that Jesus was "made flesh of (the) Holy Spirit and of Mary the Virgin," and that he "went up into the heavens." In the case of the ascension, if extreme latitude of interpretation were allowed, it might be argued that the Creed permits what is called a symbolical or spiritual interpretation, though one's right to such an interpretation would be at best precarious. But how can you interpret the statement about the Virgin Birth symbolically? It is hardly conceivable—in the present stage of the critical study of the Gospels—that it should be seriously proposed to exclude from the reunited church those who do not believe in the Virgin Birth. Yet what is the position otherwise? Men apparently must be prepared to declare their belief in a historical fact which they do not believe, in order to prove their fitness for

¹ "The obvious fact is that one might accept almost every article of the historic creeds without thereby pledging himself to the most elementary qualifications as a Christian."—Peabody, in the *Hibbert Journal* (January, 1921), p. 225. Cf. Martineau, *Seat of Authority*, p. 650.

church-membership, and they are to be left to settle with their own consciences whether they can do this or not.¹ If their consciences are sufficiently pliable to permit of their making a solemn statement of their personal beliefs, which, judged by the usually accepted standards, is simply not true, and to allow them to shield themselves under the permission to interpret symbolically, well and good; but if not, they are to remain outside, because they cannot expect a new creed to be written for them, or Christianity to be reconstructed to suit their taste! Is this, I ask, a satisfactory solution? Have we not overshot the mark when, for the sake of honoring a venerable creed, we have to shut up genuine Christians to a choice between excluding themselves from the church and playing fast and loose with truth, and to clear ourselves by giving due notice that the responsibility must rest with their own consciences?

But is not this whole idea of symbolically interpreting a personal creedal pledge totally unsatisfactory? For besides opening the door to a dangerous tampering with sincerity of speech,² it means a departure from the purpose of those who enacted the Creed, along with a pretense that there is no such departure. Our deference to the early church is to force us to retain its Creed for the same purpose as that for which the early church established it, viz.: the exclusion of heresy; yet it is not to prevent us interpreting the clauses of the Creed in a way that would have seemed to the early church utterly heretical. But either the utterance of the church in the Creed is absolutely binding, or it is not. If it is, then we are right in insisting on its acceptance by all church-members, but we have no right to interpret its clauses otherwise than as its authors meant them; if not, then we are free to interpret it as we feel led, but in that case the ground for making the verbal acceptance of it a condition of church-membership disappears.

¹ See the passage previously quoted from Dr. Headlam.

² See, e.g., Rev. H. Handley's words in the *Hibbert Journal* (January, 1914), pp. 340 f. for the idea of the *representative* repetition of the Creed in worship.

That modern symbolical interpretations would have been regarded by the early Christians as heretical can hardly be disputed. For the Creed is couched in the language of two ancient systems of belief now entirely abandoned—geocentric cosmology and Jewish eschatology. Its statement, for instance, that Jesus “rose on the third day according to the Scriptures” reflects the notion, now obsolete, but firmly held by the Jews of Palestine in our Lord’s day, that a dead man could not be still living, unless his physical body as well as his soul were alive; and it really precludes any interpretation of our Lord’s post-mortal activity on the lines of our more spiritual beliefs as to the future life. Dr. Headlam would apparently leave men quite free to spiritualize this and other causes of the Creed. “We all hold some clauses to be symbolical in their language,” he says, “and I think it quite honest to extend that principle, although personally I should not agree with it.”¹ But it has to be pointed out that a spiritual interpretation of these clauses, under which the Second Advent is regarded as the presence of the indwelling Christ, the judgment as the eternally proceeding separation of good from bad, the resurrection either as conversion or else as the beginning of a new life made by every individual at the moment of death,² would certainly have been regarded as heretical by the early church. We know how severely such suggestions were dealt with by the highest authorities in early times. Paul came down very heavily on the Greeks at Corinth who said that there was no resurrection,³ as also did the author of the

¹ *Doctrine*, etc., p. 238.

² Cf. Clarke, *Outline of Christian Theology*, p. 458: “If no visible descent of Christ is looked for, no simultaneous resurrection of humanity on the earth will be expected . . . we shall naturally think that each human being’s resurrection takes place at his death, and consists in the rising of the man from death to life in another realm of life.” (Similarly Martineau, *Seat of Authority*, p. 570.) Jesus’ words to the robber, “*This day* shalt thou be with me in Paradise,” are consistent with this view of the Resurrection, but not with that usually accepted, according to which Jesus was in the tomb (or in Hades) until the third day.

³ I Cor. 15:12: these would not be men who denied the future life, but those who conceived it on Platonic (i.e., discarnate), rather than Jewish, lines.

Pastorals on those who said that the resurrection had already occurred,¹ and the worthy Polykarpos on "whoever perverts the words of the Lord, to [suit] his own lusts, and says that there is neither resurrection nor judgment."² The Fourth Gospel, with its spiritualized eschatology, probably owed its escape from orthodox censure only to the guarded obscurity of its language, the belief in its apostolic authorship, and its strange admixture of orthodox eschatological phrases.³ To accept today an ancient creed in a sense which departs widely from that held by the early church, which the early church would undoubtedly have repudiated as heretical, and which puts a strain on the logic as well as on the morals of many a modern signatory—and to do this with the idea that we are thereby safeguarding the essentials of the Christian faith and protecting the church from the entrance of heresy—is much too questionable a proceeding to serve as one of the foundation-stones of a great enterprise like Christian reunion.

While this proposed combination of verbal bondage with exegetical freedom is unsatisfactory, the exegetical freedom itself is a real necessity. In the first place, man must theorize about his religion. "As the eye naturally desires light and vision, and our body needs by nature food and drink, so our mind feels a peculiar and natural longing to know the truth of God and to become acquainted with the causes of things."⁴ But while this effort needs no justification, is divinely helped, and is fruitful in valuable results, yet absolute infallibility in our findings is beyond our reach. Christian doctrines are "human attempts to interpret human experiences—the unique personality of Jesus of Nazareth supreme among those human experiences."⁵ "We must differentiate between the experience of the early Christian church and its theological expressions . . . the forms in which it is expressed must

¹ II Tim. 2: 18.

³ John 5: 25, 28 f., etc.

² *Ep. ad Philipp.* vii. 1.

⁴ Origenes, *Princ.* ii. 11. 4.

⁵ Bethune-Baker, *Early History of Christian Doctrine*, p. x.

necessarily be related to the mental heredity of those who express it.”¹ “We often fancy . . . that . . . the Holy Spirit can have no share in imparting partial and imperfect views of truth. But this is a sad misjudgment. God is so great that he can make much of imperfect agencies. His Spirit can have a helpful share in imperfect works.”² Dr. Headlam himself fully recognizes this. He says:

Some have tried to find this infallible authority in Scripture, but they are at once confronted with the difficulty of the want of an authoritative interpreter and the discrepancies between different passages. Others have tried to find it in the authority of the church, but no one has yet been able to find an authoritative statement of where the authority of the church really lies. Others have tried to find it in the infallibility of popes, but they are immediately confronted with the fact that many utterances of popes have been erroneous, and that there is no exact means of distinguishing which papal utterances are infallible and which are not. The demand for infallibility is one which, in human life, it is impossible to gratify. All truth here must have an element of relativity and imperfection.³

Truly and rightly said; but in that case we cannot claim that the Nicene Creed is infallible; and it is therefore possible, on Dr. Headlam’s own premises, that, where a modern Christian disbelieves some part of it, he may be right and the Creed wrong; yet the fact of his differing from the Creed is to keep him out of the church! The right attitude toward it would seem to be that which Dr. Headlam himself takes up toward other creeds and confessions—that, namely, which regards them as “the venerable relics of many sincere attempts to find and define the truth,”⁴ from which we may learn much, but which, owing to the conditions under which they had to be framed, are not fitted to be binding for all ages.⁵

¹ Halliday, *Reconciliation and Reality*, p. 25.

² Clarke, *Outline of Christian Theology*, p. 384.

³ *Doctrine*, etc., pp. 169 f.

⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 235.

⁵ “Place yourself at the standpoint of their framers and their age, allow for the fashion of their thought as you would allow for the idiom and vocabulary of their language, bear in mind the things they did not know, the history they had not read, the questions they had not raised and faced, the experience they had not enjoyed, the scholarship beyond their reach, and you will not do them the injustice of making them oracles for all time, or representing that their sceptre and their rod can arrest the tide of divine revelation and of human science.”—Curtis, in the *Hibbert Journal* (January, 1914), p. 320.

It would follow from the conclusions reached in the foregoing line of argument that none of the ancient creeds, nor any creed that could ever be written, could suitably serve as a test for admission to the church. This view is at variance with the presupposition of Dr. Headlam's argument, viz.: that a written creed of *some* kind is indispensable as the basis of the reunited church. He urges against the non-creedal position the two considerations (1) that unlimited private judgment is not a sufficient basis for a religious society, and (2) the various branches of Christendom will insist upon a creedal basis. The latter of these two points is of secondary importance; we must not be debarred from the one defensible conclusion by the probability that some of our fellow-disciples will refuse to agree to it. The former rests on the assumption that, because ordinary human societies need rules and conditions of membership and machinery for the expulsion of the unworthy, so the church must have its creedal test and its power to excommunicate. But the analogy drawn between the church and an ordinary human association is misleading. What is true of the tennis club is not necessarily true of the church. For the church is universal and divine; and the conditions of its life are inward and spiritual, and therefore not such as can be judged and tested by others in a final way like the payment of a subscription.¹

But Dr. Headlam does not touch the true basis of the non-creedal position. This position is not, "The Bible and the Bible only, and therefore not the Creed," but "Neither the Bible nor the Creed as an *ultimate* authority, but both the Bible and the Creed as valuable 'sources' to be studied by the light of God's Spirit operating within us." This raises the question of the nature of ultimate authority in religion.

Owing to a natural craving for infallible and objective standards, and a horror of being too individualistic and too

¹ For a similar assumption in regard to the government needed by the church, cf. J. H. Newman, *Essay on Development*, pp. 53 f.

subjective, we often fail to see that the real foundation of religious authority is an inward and personal one, planted in that one region where God and ourselves come into immediate contact—the testimony of His Spirit in our own hearts.¹ Why do we value the Bible above other books? Not because others do so—for on that ground we might equally well follow the Koran. Surely only because God's Spirit within us enables us to recognize the divine finger-print in so many parts of the Bible. Why do we extol Christ above all others? Not because high claims have been made by him and for him, for the same could be said of Bar-kokba and Buddha; but because the divine in us re-echoes, tallies with, and testifies to, the divine in him.² And why do we believe in a creed? Not because it was carried unanimously at some early Christian synod, assembled under the shadow of an emperor's palace, and was then bolstered into general acceptance by the violent arm of the law; but only because or in so far as the divine Spirit, operating within us, prompts us to recognize and accept that statement as true. When therefore it is said, by the Lambeth Conference, that the Scriptures are the *ultimate* standard of faith, the statement is inexact; for if a standard is really ultimate, you have no right to pronounce one part of it more important or authoritative than another. We all do that with Scripture, whatever our theory of inspiration. But whoever does it introduces at once a more ultimate standard than Scripture itself; he introduces, that is, his own power—the gift of the Holy Spirit—of discerning divine truth in what is external and objective. Thus he who reproaches others with “picking and choosing what suits them” is in grave danger of being hoist with his own petard. Therefore “The Bible only, and not the Creed” is an error,

¹ Cf. W. E. Channing, *Works* (1843 ed.), Vol. I, pp. 164 f., 601; Vol. II, pp. 66 f., 69, 99.

² “If, as we believe, God has revealed Himself in Christ, it is only God Himself stirring in men's hearts who can teach the meaning and force of that revelation.”—L. Dougall, *Hibbert Journal* (January, 1921), p. 306.

because it ignores the real foundation of authority. But, for precisely the same reason, to make a written creed the final court of appeal is also an error.

This doctrine of the ultimacy of the inner or subjective element is often condemned because it is wrongly thought to involve two ideas, viz.: (1) that all objective embodiment of authority is by it pronounced unnecessary, and (2) that the "Inner Light" should make us infallible (which it obviously does not). Both of these are misapprehensions. By avoiding the first, and recognizing that it is the function of the "Inner Light" quite as much to give us power to recognize truth found by others as to enable us to arrive at it by our own unaided efforts, we can find a real place in our system for all external authorities, without robbing the individual of his sovereign right to decide for himself whom to trust as God's spokesmen. By avoiding the second error, we shall see why different men, though prompted by the same Spirit, arrive at different convictions in regard to the truth; the personal factor, which conditions our reading of the Spirit's witness, is something different for each of us, and cannot be measured or eliminated.

A thorough examination, therefore, of our powers to frame a list of Christian essentials shows clearly that no Christian and no set of Christians, however truly guided by the Spirit, and however wide the measure of agreement reached, is equipped with the necessary powers to determine absolutely the essentials of Christianity for any but themselves. There was every reason, in the nature of the case, why Baxter should find the settling of essentials "a ticklish business."

There is only one thing in which we can be sure that all Christians will agree—at least all Christians who come into consideration as possible members of the church. *They will all be willing to profess faith in Christ.* That, and that only, is the real "quod semper, quod ubique, quod ab omnibus."¹ To

¹ Bartlet and Carlyle, *Christianity in History*, p. 343.

demand from applicants for admission to the church that they shall publicly and whole-heartedly profess faith in Christ is not open to the various objections that have been urged against the demand for the Nicene Creed; it is to ask for that without which—in some form—the Christian church would cease to have any *raison d'être*. If it be objected that this bare confession is a very inadequate summary of Christianity, I would urge that the ministers of the church will still be as free as ever to *teach* to others what they regard as the most important Christian truths and duties. If it be asked how, on these lines, the unity, purity, and true orthodoxy of the church are to be preserved, I reply, by the unifying, purifying, and enlightening power of the Spirit of God. If it be said that the proposed test will admit many improper persons to church-membership, I would point out that even the Nicene Creed will not prevent that, and that it is more calamitous and wrong to give the cold shoulder to one of the least of these brethren of Christ who believe in him, but who cannot sign the Creed, than to admit a number of possibly unworthy members. The exclusion of these latter, if it be really desirable, can be expected to follow of itself, if only the atmosphere within our Christian communities is made sufficiently Christian. The author of *Ecce Homo* tells us that “without excluding any, Christ suffered the unworthy to exclude themselves. He kept them aloof by offering them nothing which they could find attractive.” Can the church do better than follow her Lord’s example in this respect? “We shall probably find that it is by keeping alight the central fires of devotion and dedication, and by more positive teaching on the practice or demands of church membership, rather than by over-guarding the entrance, that unworthy invasion will be prevented.”¹

¹ *Pathways to Christian Unity* (1919), p. 204.